

A Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Maine



Felix Arnold Burton
1885-1949

One of Maine's popular architects in the early twentieth century was Felix Arnold Burton, a 1907 Bowdoin College graduate who designed more than forty projects for Brunswick residents between 1906 and 1942. Burton was trained in architecture in the Beaux-Arts tradition at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and was also influenced by the Colonial Revival movement. As a consequence, he became skilled in designing works in the Classical and Colonial architectural traditions. His buildings were

finely crafted of wood, brick, wrought iron, stone, and the new material cast-stone.

Born in Millis, Massachusetts in 1885, Felix Burton was the eldest son of Alfred E. Burton (1857-1935) of Portland and was the great-grandson of John Rogers Larrabee, a nineteenth century Brunswick housewright. After attending boarding school in Massachusetts, it was a logical choice for Felix to study at Bowdoin College, as Bowdoin was his father's alma mater. Burton's artistic interests were already developed by the time he entered college. He finished his undergraduate years as Artist and Art Editor of the *Bowdoin Bugle*. His senior yearbook published twenty-two of his sketches of the college and the town. Most were signed by a logo which he designed that positioned the word "Felix" around a circular, smiling face. This was a clever association, considering that "Felix" means "happy" in Latin. During his Bowdoin years, Burton resided at the Delta Kappa Epsilon House at Maine and College Streets. Here he met Helen Lancaster Eaton, the daughter of Brunswick industrialist Russell W. Eaton. The Eatons resided at 17 Federal Street, close to where Burton would later locate his practice.

After graduating *cum laude* from Bowdoin in 1907, Felix Burton studied architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where he received his B.S. degree in 1909 and his M.S. degree in 1911. At M.I.T. he studied composition and rendering in watercolor, pen and pencil, freehand drawing, modelling, ornament, design theory, design practice, heating and ventilation, architectural engineering, and building stones. Architectural history was also a required subject, because continuity with architectural tradition was a fundamental precept of architectural design. M.I.T.'s *Technology Architectural Record* chronicled Felix's accomplishments at the school. It described his association with the prestigious Boston firm of Allen and Collens after 1909, published the names of 118 architectural landmarks he studied in Europe in 1910, and noted prizes that he won. By 1909 Burton had designed student projects for a summer pavilion, two gateways, and a "large department



Figure 1. Bowdoin College Gymnasium and Hyde Athletic Building, Brunswick, circa 1915 view (MHPC).

store in which an arcade is the principal feature to be erected on the site of the Park Square Station in Boston." By 1911 he was awarded honors for six other projects, which included a sculpture gallery, a hotel, and an urban square. He also won first mention for "A Memorial Hall connected to a Gym in an Important University Center." These accomplishments laid the groundwork for Burton's professional career. He would be remembered in later years as a skilled designer of university buildings in association with Allen and Collens.

Between 1911 and 1914, Burton travelled extensively in the United States and Europe, taking steps to establish an independent practice. In October, 1911, he returned to Brunswick, Maine and married Helen Lancaster Eaton in her family home. The newlyweds then moved to Helena, Montana, where Felix worked for architect G. H. Carsley. By May, 1912, the couple moved further west, after Felix assumed a new position with the firm of Albert E. Doyle in Portland, Oregon.

In Doyle's office Burton executed drawings for Elliot Hall and Dormitory at Reed College as well as the Northwest Bank Building and the Morgan Building in Portland. In these projects Burton was exposed to the new technology of cast-stone construction, which he later used in Maine. The Burtons also befriended a Doyle employee, J. M. Hatton, and the three embarked upon a six-month architectural tour of Italy, Greece, England, and France in 1913. Felix's sketchbooks survive from this trip. They contain a great deal of measured drawings of details and watercolor sketches of Renaissance period buildings in Italy. There are a few sketches of buildings in Athens, Cambridge, and at Versailles, but the books suggest a very strong preference for the Italian Renaissance, particularly gardens and towers.

By January, 1914, one M.I.T. alumnus noted that "Hatton and Burton are back again and in New York." Burton was attempting to work independently there and in the process made contact with the noted master of wrought iron, Samuel Yellin of Philadelphia. Yellin's talents were just beginning to receive national attention following a 1914 article published in the *A.I.A. Journal*. At this time Burton received letters from Ellis F. Lawrence, an M.I.T. graduate who was then founding the School of Architecture and Allied Art at the University of Oregon. Lawrence wrote confidentially that he was "trying to get Felix Burton... to assist me on the staff... to take the design end of the Architectural Course at the University of Oregon. His personality and training seem to me to make him especially fitted for tak-

ing up the work in design." However, Burton declined, stating that he could not come for two or three years at least. By 1915 Felix and Helen Burton had relocated to Brunswick, Maine, renovated and moved into the "Drew House" at 13 Federal Street, and set up housekeeping adjacent to her family home.

Burton's architectural reputation in Brunswick actually preceded his 1915 relocation to the town. As early as 1912, he had designed two large buildings for Bowdoin College in association with Allen & Collens of Boston. When plans for the connected Bowdoin College Gymnasium and Thomas W. Hyde Athletic Building were unveiled in January, 1912, Burton was considered primarily responsible for the design (Figure 1). These two buildings put into practice many of the theories he had worked out in his 1911 M.I.T. Gymnasium project. The essential problem was to fit a large complex into a small-scale historic college campus. Burton managed to tailor the building to its site by breaking the mass into two connected structures, limiting the height to three visible floor levels on the exterior facade and choosing cladding of brick and stone that was carefully designed to harmonize with the campus. On the interior, Burton's gymnasium complex accomplished even lighting with a monitor roof design, removed supports from the playing area with long clear-span roof trusses, and achieved efficient use of space by employing a suspended running track. This \$94,000 athletic complex was considered progressive for its time and was published in the *American Architect* in March, 1917.

After returning to Brunswick in 1915, Burton continued to associate with Allen & Collens in four projects: Brunswick High School of 1915, Dudley Coe Memorial Infirmary of 1916, William DeWitt Hyde



Figure 2. First National Bank, Brunswick, circa 1920 view (MHPC).

Hall of 1917, and the First National Bank of 1917-18 (Figure 2). These buildings reflected new concepts and technologies that Burton had learned in his 1911-14 travels. In particular, Brunswick High School was graced with a massing and a facade that was modelled after Renaissance buildings the architect had studied in Europe. It also contains cast-stone detailing as well as iron work by Yellin.

The First National Bank also integrates both of these technologies into a dignified composition that references the work of two of America's first architects, Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Henry Latrobe. The tetra-style temple front and original Gothic-arched window muntins for this building recall Jefferson's Pavilion IV at the University of Virginia, while the so-called "corn cob capitals" pay respect to Jefferson's friend Latrobe who first invented that feature for the United States Capitol in Washington. Latrobe's intent was to create a specifically American architectural order. Likewise, Burton desired to use historic motifs to represent the essential characteristics of a place. It seems likely that the corn order was chosen because canned corn was a major Maine industry in the early twentieth century, controlled to a large extent by the Baxter family of Brunswick, who maintained an office above the main banking floor. To further localize the building to its site, Burton and Yellin incorporated "the

signs of the six ruling Indian chiefs of this section" into the wrought iron lantern that was suspended above the entry. Many of these historical references were made because the First National Bank was situated adjacent to one of Brunswick's oldest landmarks, the 1794 Forsaith House, for which Burton designed a Colonial Revival fence. Regrettably, the Forsaith House was demolished in 1967.

Felix Burton enjoyed designing new buildings for historic settings because this form of commission allowed him to reinterpret established traditions to solve immediate design problems. It also gave him the opportunity to insist upon fine craftsmanship. Colonial Revival residences show Burton at his best, integrating elements from the Classical and Colonial traditions. The Hutchins House of 1915 at 59 Federal Street marks its Federal and Maple Street corner with a vivid massing that unites two asymmetric saltbox facades of historic American origins in a formal composition that reveals Burton's Beaux-Arts training. The Hutchins House is accented with classical trim and fine leaded glass near the entry. The Achorn House of 1925 at 62 Federal Street recalls many of its neighbors with its traditional New England massing and classical detailing, yet boldly is structured with a four (not five) bay facade and displays an elegant Gothic window design that recalls the work of



Figure 3. Alpha Delta Phi House, Bowdoin College, Brunswick (Richard Cheek Photograph).

William Buckland, another of Jefferson's contemporaries. The Copeland House at 88 Federal Street is an organic grouping of gambrel roof masses which successfully recalls early American residences like the 1637 Fairbanks House in Dedham, Massachusetts. Yet all the elements of this residence are also ordered by a Renaissance formalism.

Boody Street in the 1920s was a more remote, wooded location which required buildings of a formal nature to give order to the landscape. The Goodrich House of 1926 at 10 Boody Street and the Johnson House of 1927 at 12 Boody Street achieved this with a tour de force of refined Colonial detail on simple masses that are set back from the street. These two structures possess the air of distinguished country estates and established a quality of development on this street that is noteworthy. Traditional elements such as classical trim, pediments and porticos, balustrades, six-over-six or eight-over-eight windows, and "bull's-eye" and leaded glass were all items in Burton's repertoire, used here effectively to create two distinctly memorable places.

Responding to more established historic localities, Burton gave Bowdoin College two of its finest fraternity houses, the Alpha Delta Phi House of 1924 at Maine and Potter Streets and the Theta Delta Chi House of 1942 at Maine and McKeen. The Alpha Delta Phi House was intended to be "unquestionably the finest fraternity house at the College," built of "permanent construction" with water-struck brick and a slate roof, designed in the Georgian Colonial style with a sophisticated Salem doorway, balustrade, and windows with Gothic-arched tracery. A painting by William Wallace Gilchrist that depicted the

Bowdoin campus as it appeared in 1840 was set into the panelling of the mantel in the large front room. The Theta Delta Chi House was a notable project, built of similar masonry around an existing timber-framed structure. In a two-phased process, Burton also designed alterations to the Delta Kappa Epsilon House of his youth.

Felix Burton was active in designing gateways which defined specific points of entry and departure on the Bowdoin College campus. His earliest efforts towards this end were made in 1914-15, when he donated to Bowdoin "two water-color drawings, designs for Gateways to the campus and to Whittier Athletic Field" which he rendered himself. He later designed the Warren Robinson Gateway of 1919-20, the Professor and Mrs. Franklin Robinson Gateway of 1922-23,

the Class of 1907 or President's Gateway of 1932, and the Alpheus Spring Packard Gateway of 1940. Burton's gateways, like his buildings, were carefully planned to harmonize with the site and were built to meet high standards of construction. The wrought iron work in all of Burton's gates was fabricated by Samuel Yellin's company in Philadelphia. Recently, it has been recognized that "In the twentieth century, the name Yellin stands for excellence in ironwork in America. Yellin executed most of his major commissions between 1920 and 1940. He used every method of metal working—cutting, splitting, twisting, scrolling, punching, incising, repousse, and banding—to achieve unique designs." The Bowdoin College gateways were produced through the combined imaginations of two gifted designers, Felix Arnold Burton and Samuel Yellin. These graceful structures are especially significant because traditional wrought iron is no longer produced commercially in America today.

In the Brunswick area, much of Burton's practice was devoted to modernizations, additions, and restorations to historic structures. Two of his largest projects in this category were the restoration of Bowdoin's oldest building, Massachusetts Hall in 1936 and the restoration of the Captain Daniel Holden House in Topsham for Jack Frost in 1938. The Massachusetts Hall work included restoring a Federal style hip roof and creating a period stairway on the interior. Even when his budget was limited, Burton was still capable of producing noteworthy effects. About 1920 he designed \$3,000 in alterations for Gilpin Smith, who was then living at 74 Federal Street in Brunswick. To this day, Burton's elegant

balustrade and portico contribute strongly to that 1826 building's historic presence on the street. With an identical budget in 1917-18, Burton designed a rusticated "ashlar" front with classical pediment and trim for the old wooden Union National Bank building which stood on Maine Street. The Renaissance-inspired front made the structure "thoroughly up to date" in 1918 and endowed the building with such appeal that it was saved from destruction when its site was needed for other purposes in 1931. Burton's modernized Union National Bank was moved back onto nearby Town Hall Place, where it currently functions as a barber shop.

Burton always maintained that the site was one of the strongest influences for any design. Therefore, it should not be too surprising to find that he employed significantly different styles when called upon to work in different locations. Perhaps the most extreme example of this was the lodge for Richard Sturo which Burton planned near Jackman, Maine in 1929. Jackman is a rural settlement near the Canadian border, surrounded by woods in every direction. Burton responded by designing for Sturo one of Maine's largest log structures. Behind this rustic order, however, one still finds Burton's M.I.T. training reflected in the balustrades and columns he built of logs on the building's exterior. These elements lend a classical grace to the whole composition.

Two of Felix Burton's most interesting projects were designed for the heirs of Admiral Robert E. Peary, who wanted to create memorials to commemorate the Arctic explorer's achievements. Burton was chosen as architect because his father had been a close friend of Peary both as a student at Bowdoin College and later in the Arctic. As an adult, Peary summered on Eagle Island in Casco Bay, directly south of Brunswick. A sixty foot tall stone obelisk stands on Mark Island near Eagle Island to mark the navigational

channel. Peary was familiar with this landmark and desired that a replica be made to stand on his own resting place as a memorial to exploration and his love of Maine. This desire could not be fulfilled because Peary was interred at Arlington National Cemetery, which has strict regulations concerning the height of monuments erected there. Working with the Peary heirs in 1932, Burton created an alternative full-size obelisk for an appropriate Arctic site. Overlooking Baffin Bay on Cape York in Thule, Burton's obelisk memorial stands as a stone beacon with the initial letter "P", recalling Peary's presence in those remote parts. In 1938 Burton designed a second

memorial to Peary at Jockey Cap near Fryeburg. Here a "Mountain Viewer" memorial identifies the great explorer with timeless geological features.

Following sixteen months service in World War I, Felix Burton relocated his architectural practice from Maine to Massachusetts. Burton maintained his office in Boston at 119 Water Street from 1919 through 1922. He then moved his quarters to room 602 at 234 Boylston Street. Over the years he maintained a staff which included Dana Somes, Edwin Goodell, Frederick Wead, Richard Fisher, and Charles Pitkin as associates, and Carl Priestley as draftsman. Massachusetts projects included the Felix Burton House at 64 Collins Road in Waban, an addition to the Union Church in Waban, a house for Professor Copeland in Wood's Hole, two fraternity houses for M.I.T. in Cambridge, and the

Record Building in downtown Boston. Burton closed his Boylston Street office in 1943 and died in Boston in 1949 at the age of sixty-four. The full extent of his practice may never be known, but it is clear that over fifty works in New England testify to the sophisticated imagination of Felix Arnold Burton, architect.

John V. Goff



Figure 4. Alpheus Spring Packard Gateway, Bowdoin College, Brunswick (Richard Cheek Photograph).

SOURCES

The author wishes to thank Alice Burton Lentz for sharing records from the Felix A. Burton archives; George A. McMath for sharing information from the Albert E. Doyle archives; Patricia Anderson, David Burnett, Eleanor Goodrich, and Helen Semerjian for invaluable assistance with research in Brunswick.

LIST OF KNOWN COMMISSIONS IN MAINE BY FELIX A. BURTON

Professor Marston Copeland House, 88 Federal Street, Brunswick, c. 1906, Extant

* Bowdoin College Gymnasium, Brunswick, 1912, Extant

* Thomas W. Hyde Athletic Building, Bowdoin College, Brunswick, 1912, Extant

Portico and Alterations to Drew House, 13 Federal Street, Brunswick, c. 1915, Extant

Proposed Gateways for Bowdoin College, Brunswick, 1914-15

Remodel Sargent Gymnasium as Bowdoin College Union, Brunswick, 1915, Altered

* Brunswick High School (now Hawthorne School), 46 Federal Street, Brunswick, 1915, Extant

Professor Charles C. Hutchins House, 59 Federal Street, Brunswick, 1916-17, Extant

* Dudley Coe Memorial Infirmary, Bowdoin College, Brunswick, 1916, Extant

* William DeWitt Hyde Hall, 1917, Bowdoin College, Brunswick, 1917, Extant

Remodel Union National Bank, Maine Street, Brunswick, 1917-18, Extant

* First National Bank, 106-110 Maine Street, Brunswick, 1917-18, Altered

Forsaith House Fence, 110 Maine Street, Brunswick, c. 1918, Destroyed

Warren Robinson Gateway, Bowdoin College, Brunswick, 1919-20, Extant

Remodel Sargent Gymnasium as Heating Plant, Bowdoin College, Brunswick, 1920, Extant.

Remodel Professor M. Phillips Mason House, 159 Maine Street, Brunswick, 1920, Destroyed

Remodel Professor Charles T. Burnett House, 232 Maine Street, Brunswick, 1922, Extant

Russell W. Eaton Monument, Pine Grove Cemetery, Brunswick, 1922, Extant

Professor and Mrs. Franklin Robinson Gateway, Bowdoin College, Brunswick, 1922-23, Extant

Alpha Delta Phi Fraternity House, 228 Maine Street, Brunswick, 1924, Extant

Professor Edgar O. Achorn House, 62 Federal Street, Brunswick, 1925, Extant

Reverend Chauncey W. Goodrich House, 10 Boody Street, Brunswick, 1926, Extant

Dr. Henry L. Johnson House, 12 Boody Street, Brunswick, 1927, Extant

Richard Sutro Lodge, near Jackman, 1929, Extant

Class of 1907 (now President's) Gateway, Bowdoin College, Brunswick, 1932, Altered

Massachusetts Hall Restoration, Bowdoin College, Brunswick, 1936, Extant

Admiral Robert E. Peary Memorial, Jockey Cap near Fryeburg, 1938, Extant

Alterations to Captain Daniel Holden House for Jack Frost, 24 Elm Street, Topsham, 1938-39, Extant

Alpheus Spring Packard Gateway, Bowdoin College, Brunswick, 1940, Extant

Theta Delta Chi Fraternity House, Potter Street, Brunswick, 1942, Extant

Garage for Bowdoin College President's House, 85 Federal Street, Brunswick, Extant

Ballroom for Bowdoin College President's House, 85 Federal Street, Brunswick, Extant

Stanley Chase Garage, 256 Maine Street, Brunswick, Extant

Remodel "Mustard" House, 234 Maine Street, Brunswick, Extant

Remodel Pat Quimby House, McKeen Street, Brunswick, Extant

Alterations to Delta Kappa Epsilon Fraternity House, Brunswick, Extant

Remodel Memorial Hall, Bowdoin College, Brunswick, Extant

Portico and Balustrade for Gilpin Smith House, 74 Federal Street, Brunswick, Extant

Remodel John Rogers Larrabee House, 10 Mason Street, Brunswick, Extant

Alterations to Dr. Gilbert M. Elliott House, Pleasant and Maine Streets, Brunswick, Destroyed

Professor Franklin Robinson Memorial, Pine Grove Cemetery, Brunswick, Extant

Alterations to Class of 1878 Gateway, Bowdoin College, Brunswick, Extant

* Designed by Felix Burton in association with Allen and Collens of Boston.

Volume 7, 1995

Published by Maine Citizens for Historic Preservation

Earle G. Shettleworth, Jr., Editor

Roger G. Reed, Associate Editor